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TEACHING WITH COMICS

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Comics can be used in different ways in education across age groups and subjects, both as an object of study itself, or as a way to learn through making and reading comics. Main reason to use comics in teaching? It engages and motivates students.

RESEARCH, COMICS AND TEACHING

In the last decade, the research into comics has grown and one area of this research is concerned with how comics can aid teaching. Especially in the Anglophone world, teachers, librarians and researchers have started using comics in all areas of the educational system. For example, comics about natural sciences, like **Jay Hostler's** *Clan Apis* about the life cycle of bees, or the comics anthology *Asteroid Belter* which deals with science problems of all kinds. Comics are used in language teaching because the relatively small amount of text and the use of images aid learners when they struggle with a new language. Comics are also read and analyzed for history classes, social science classes, or in the classes where children learn to read.

Only the teacher's imagination puts limits on how comics can be used in teaching, and I encourage all teachers to try out comics in their classroom. However, as a literary scholar, I will focus in this article on how to use comics in the literature and language classes.

COMICS AND THE VISUAL

Because comics are visual, they appeal to young people. The students are already familiar with images and video from their daily use of Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, gaming and other digital media and platforms. This means they already have knowledge and competencies within the field of visual literacy, which teachers can use to their advantage by using it both in the analytical work with reading comics, as well as in written text.

Comics can both strengthen the students' reading skills, as well as their abilities to read and understand mixed media with visual and verbal ways of expressing content. It is also easy to make comics and the students can be motivated to their own production of comics, which supports their writing skills and helps them formulate and structure stories. Making comics can also be a way of analyzing and understanding older classical texts which are usually hard for contemporary students to access.

COMICS AS LITERATURE

In classes both in primary school and high school, the students are required to read canonical texts and these texts can sometimes be very difficult for the students to understand. Teachers struggle to contextualize these older texts for their students and make their relevance clear in a contemporary world, where the students' everyday life is more and more connected with globalized and complex realities and worlds where the nationality perhaps plays a smaller role than previously.

And literature is precisely a way to access and understand complex realities, because literature always poses and always have posed fundamental questions, which are of interest for all people at all times. Literature is novels, essays, poems, and yes, even comics. And the important thing for teachers is to motivate the engagement with literature for the students, so that it makes sense in the world they live in. And comics can be helpful with this.

TEACHING HEROES

As an example of how this can be done, I will discuss a collaboration class that I taught together with **Mette Jørgensen**, who was a high school teacher at the time. I was teaching a university course on reading comics at the Literature Department and Mette was teaching Danish and English for the first year students in high school.

The university students had the opportunity to try out their theoretical and analytical knowledge about comics and test their teaching skills with the high school students. The teaching followed the rules of education in Danish high schools, which stipulates that the students read older Danish as well as translated literature. In this case centered around the theme of “heroes”.

The students worked with an excerpt from Achilles’ battle against Hector in **Homer’s Iliad** and with a version of *Gretir the Strong’s Saga*. The students also read **Marjane Satrapi’s** comic *Persepolis* and read more generally about heroes in comics (superheroes, for instance).

The class was made in collaboration with English subject, where the students read *Beowulf*, a *Robin Hood ballad* and an excerpt from **Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe** from 1719. This meant that the students were reading older classical texts along with the modern comics, which were thematically linked through heroes and heroics. The students then discussed how heroes and the role of an hero changes over the time and historically are connected to different contexts and themes, such as honor, power, duty, ambition, anxiety, religion or politics.

To end the project, we arranged a remediation workshop, where the university students facilitated a workshop and the high school students chose the texts they had worked on and transformed them into their own comics.

REMEDIATION AS ANALYSIS

The remediation became a process of analysis for the students, without the students realizing what they were doing. First they made the comics, then we put difficult abstract concepts to the process of analysis. The students had fun and they realized that it can be fun to read and that they are perfectly capable of it. They experienced how they were able to sum up a narrative, find the most important points and analyze the characters, which was a consequence of the way they had to revisit the original texts in order to make their comic.

The process of making comics in this way becomes a tool for the teacher to ensure that the students can transform

something very complex like the different narrator positions in a text to a process that can encompass this complexity.

When making the comics, the students could choose to draw, use cut outs from magazines and old comics, or combine drawings and cut-outs. This was done so the obstacle of “I cannot draw” could be circumvented. Everybody can draw and even with stick figures it is possible to work focused with textual analysis, because it is curiosity and excitement, which is the force behind the inquiry.

Working with remediation also had the advantage that the student could participate on whatever level they were at. And their comics offered an object of discussion, where the students and the teacher could discuss the versions of the original texts afterwards. It is easier to have a peer-to-peer discussion about a comic, than about a long written text. The visuality of the comic makes it directly accessible for the other readers.

LEARNING BY DOING

Mette Jørgensen and I have used these experiences in our writing of the book *Tegneserier og tekstlæsning*, where the idea is that the students learn by doing. Literature is an aesthetic expression, so it helps the reading, if the students have concrete, personal experience with aesthetic expression themselves.

In learning how to analyze texts, comics can be considered a kind of a literature, which has its own complex history, expression and structure. When working

with comics, the students train their verbal and visual analytical competencies and reading abilities. And when working with remediations of older literature, they are able to analyze and understand texts which can sometimes cause them to struggle with reading. Because comics are visual art and the students enjoy reading them as well as making them, they can be a great asset to any teaching situation.

LINKS FOR FURTHER READING:

Tegneserier og tekstlæsning af Rikke Platz Cortsen og Mette Jørgensen, Samfundslitteratur, 2015. Book in Danish about how to analyze comics and how to make comics to analyze canonical texts. Has suggestions of comics to use in English, Norwegian, Swedish, French and German.

<http://samfundslitteratur.dk/bog/tegneserier-og-tekstl%C3%A6sning>

“Reading with pictures” is a website which has suggestions for workshops and teaching materials as well as articles on how to use comics in teaching.

<http://www.readingwithpictures.org/>

Applied Comics is a network for people engaged in using comics for teaching and disseminating information. They have many interesting projects to look at, including science comics.

<http://www.appliedcomicsetc.com/>

SANE journal is an English language journal about teaching and comics. It has many good suggestions of comics to use in teaching and discusses how comics can be used in different subjects.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/>